

# Healthy Habits, Healthier Futures:



## Preventing Diabetes in Asia



# Executive summary

Recent decades have seen an epidemic rise in diabetes cases, with more than 540 million people living with the condition worldwide, according to the International Diabetes Federation. More than 90 million of those are in Southeast Asia, and the number of adults with diabetes in the region is projected to soar to 152 million by 2045, presenting a serious public health challenge.

Over 90% of people living with diabetes have type 2 diabetes, which is caused by a combination of socio-economic, demographic, genetic, dietary, and environmental factors. If left unmanaged, type 2 diabetes can lead to serious health complications, including the loss of eyesight, cardiovascular disease, kidney damage, skin conditions, and nerve damage.

However, adopting preventative measures, such as a healthier diet, regular exercise, and blood sugar monitoring, can help bring blood sugar levels into a safe, non-diabetes range long-term, reducing the risk of diabetes causing damage.

Sun Life's survey of 3,647 people from Hong Kong SAR, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Vietnam including over 600 living with type 2 diabetes, reveals the hidden financial and mental health impacts of the condition, the social stigma associated with diabetes, and significant knowledge gaps about risk factors and treatment. The research also explores what people with diabetes are doing to combat the condition and take back control of their lives.

## Key Insights:

### Hidden financial and mental health impacts of type 2 diabetes

Diabetes has a significant financial cost, preventing many from accessing healthcare care. One-third of diabetics (33%) reported a 'severe' or 'significant' financial impact on their lives, with 82% unable to consistently afford the right care.

Financial concerns are even more prevalent than health-related concerns. 67% of all respondents are 'very concerned' or 'concerned' about the financial burden that would result from a type 2 diabetes diagnosis. Planning for unforeseen healthcare costs

and having the protection of health insurance can help people manage the financial impacts of diabetes.

Monitoring blood sugar is key to managing diabetes, and wearable devices can make it easier. Although 42% of people with diabetes use these devices, affordability is a concern, with 40% saying cost prevents them from adopting wearable devices.

Diabetes also impacts mental health; 65% of diabetics report a negative impact on their mental health post-diagnosis. Many people with diabetes report discrimination. In the workplace, 72% said they had faced judgment or bias related to their condition. The challenge is even greater in people's personal lives, where 76% report feeling judged by family and friends.

The findings highlight the need for greater access to affordable diabetes treatment. Health insurance can play a vital role in ensuring access to affordable, quality medical care for health complications that may arise due to diabetes.

Sun Life has committed over \$55 million CAD to the fight against diabetes since 2012 to improve public awareness and empower people to better manage their health.

### Few people practice preventative measures

Diabetes remains one of Asia's most serious public health risks, but only 42% of respondents attend annual screenings for type 2 diabetes, and 37% have never been screened, resulting in unexpected diagnoses and preventable cases.

Only a small minority of those surveyed consistently practice prevention measures such as maintaining a healthy diet, monitoring weight and blood sugar, and exercising regularly. Setting a positive example with good lifestyle choices can help protect future generations. One in five parents do not ensure their children eat a healthy diet, and 30% do not encourage their children to exercise.

Improving awareness and making small changes like cutting down on sugary drinks and snacks can make a big difference over time, yet many people struggle to understand nutritional information. In total, 30% report

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difficulties in understanding hidden sugars and fats in their diets, while 24% struggle to understand the impact of different foods on blood sugar levels, underscoring the need for diabetes education programs.

Proactive diabetes prevention rests on improving awareness, helping people get active, and getting screened for the condition.

## **Declining physical activity is increasing diabetes risk**

A decline in physical activity, compounded by limited access to safe exercise spaces, is increasing diabetes risks across Asia. Nearly one-third (31%) of respondents report decreased exercise over the past five years, with younger people more likely to report a decrease. Among those reporting insufficient exercise, 46% cited a lack of access to safe, quality exercise spaces in their local areas.

Accessible exercise spaces are needed to keep people active, healthy and engaged. Since 2023, Sun Life has partnered with social change foundation Beyond Sport to launch Hoops + Health, a community program that inspires activity and healthy living through basketball by improving community access to courts and coaches across Asia. To date, Hoops + Health has helped more than 14,000 people in underprivileged communities to get active and enjoy sport.

## **Urgent need to empower people through diabetes education**

Type 2 diabetes is one of the most serious public health issues facing Asia, yet common myths about the condition prevail, mainly related to risk factors. Nearly one in three people (29%) believe that type 2 diabetes only affects overweight individuals, 57% believe it's solely caused by excessive sugar consumption, while 26% believe only older adults can develop the condition. While it is true that people most at risk of diabetes are often overweight and older, even young and healthy people can be diagnosed with type 2 diabetes.

Common misunderstandings can impact how people assess their personal risk and take control of their health. Nearly a third (29%) of people with diabetes reported having a poor understanding of the condition

before being diagnosed, and more than one-third (37%) believed they were at low risk or did not consider their risk at all. Just 4% of diabetics believed they had a high risk of diabetes.

Younger people with diabetes were also more likely to believe they had a lower-than-average risk prior to diagnosis (25%) compared to older peers (17%). A lack of awareness about the risks and causes of diabetes can hinder prevention, early diagnosis and treatment. We can lower the risk of people developing diabetes by providing better access to information and encouraging healthy eating habits and regular exercise.

## **People with diabetes can be empowered with support, understanding, and access to care**

Living with diabetes can feel overwhelming at times, but many people can significantly improve their health by making small, consistent changes. Seeking support from a medical professional is the first step on the road to a healthier future.

Although there is no cure, medical professionals say many people can reverse diabetes within a year of diagnosis through positive lifestyle changes such as healthier dietary choices and more exercise. Adopting these lifestyle changes can help maintain normal glucose levels without the need for insulin. However, not everyone is aware of how to work toward remission. Only half of all respondents believe type 2 diabetes can be managed without medication.

Few people with diabetes are actively trying to reverse their condition. While 88% of people with diabetes believe remission is possible, most do not see it as achievable within one year.

Although those with diabetes surveyed are actively adopting healthier behaviours, only 11% feel totally confident in consistently managing their blood sugar levels.

Empowering people to effectively manage their condition requires access to healthcare and medical advice, education on the latest management strategies, behavioural support for lifestyle changes, and accessible and affordable food and exercise options.

# Key findings

## Not everyone has their facts right around the condition

Diabetes...	Believe to be true
 can be prevented through lifestyle changes	93%
 can lead to serious health complications if not managed properly	92%
 is solely caused by eating too much sugar	57%
 can be managed without medication	50%
 prevents people from leading a normal life	45%

## Healthy habits are on hold as few practice preventative measures

I consistently...	
Monitor my blood pressure	15%
Check food ingredients for sugar	17%
Eat a healthy and balanced diet	19%
Exercise for more than 30 minutes per day	27%

## Young people are more likely to report exercising less than they did five years ago

<30 years old

36%



>56 years old

27%

## The top reasons for inadequate exercise are



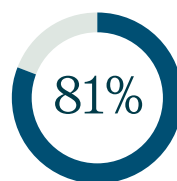
Lack of time



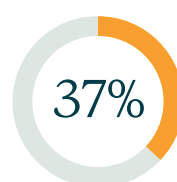
Lack of motivation



Lack of quality, safe exercise spaces in local area

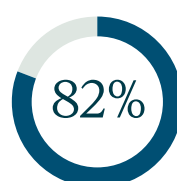
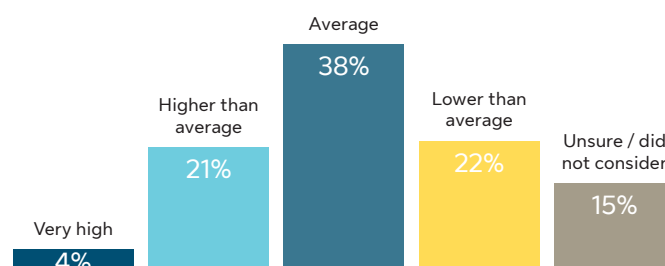


are concerned about the long-term health impacts of a potential type 2 diabetes diagnosis, yet...



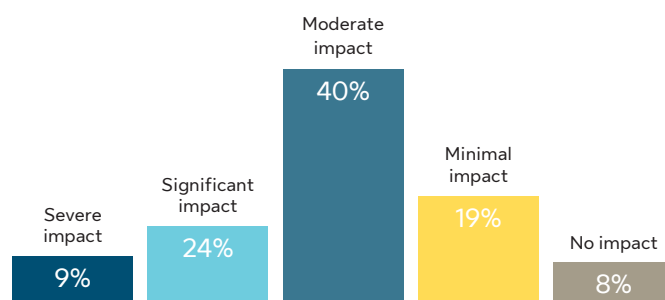
have never been screened for the condition

## Many people with diabetes underestimated the risks before diagnosis



of people with diabetes report that they struggle to consistently afford the right care

## ...as the majority struggle with the condition's impacts on their finances



# Six ways to prevent and manage diabetes and live a happier, healthier life

When it comes to diabetes prevention, there are many factors at play, but here are five actions that can help you reduce your type 2 diabetes risk and better manage the condition. Small changes today can have a significant impact on lifelong health and wellness.

- 1. Know your risk:** Get regular screenings and consult your healthcare provider to understand your specific risk factors.
- 2. Maintain a healthy weight** through proper diet and exercise.
- 3. Exercise regularly:** Aim for at least 30 minutes of moderate activity daily. If you're struggling to stay active, look for community programs that can support you.

**4. Eat a balanced diet:** Limit sugar and saturated fat intake.

**5. Prioritise sleep:** Get at least seven hours of quality sleep each night.

**6. Ensure you are protected:** plan for unforeseen healthcare costs by ensuring you have health insurance protection.

Most importantly, if you have concerns, speak to a doctor who can understand your specific needs and recommend a personalised action plan that's right for you.



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